

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05 H-01
INR-07 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02
SS-15 USIA-06 IO-13 AID-05 TRSE-00 OMB-01 /088 W
-----005998 131237Z /11

R 130918Z JAN 78
FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 9551
INFO AMEMBASSY ALGIERS
AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMEMBASSY PARIS
AMEMBASSY RABAT
AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI

S E C R E T SECTION 1 OF 2 TUNIS 0262

PARIS FOR LABATT

E.O.11652: GDS
TAGS: PFOR ELAB PGOV TS
SUBJ: ATMOSPHERICS OF TUNISIAN POLITICAL SCENE

REF: 77 TUNIS 9248

1. SUMMARY. IN THIS MESSAGE WE SUMMARIZE CERTAIN STORIES
NOW BEING CIRCULATED IN TUNIS CONCERNING THE RECENT
TUNISIAN GOVERNMENT CRISIS. EMBASSY IS UNABLE TO VOUCH FOR
AUTHENTICITY OF THESE STORIES, BUT IS REPORTING THEM FOR
DEPARTMENT'S BACKGROUND. END SUMMARY.

2. IN THIS RECENT PERIOD OF RAPID AND UNEXPECTED CHANGE
IN TUNISIAN POLITICAL RELATIONSHIPS, WE ARE HEARING A
NUMBER OF STORIES---SOME BELIEVABLE AND OTHERS LESS SO---
ABOUT WHAT IS TAKING PLACE BEHIND THE FACADE OF TRAPQUILITY
WHICH THE GOVERNMENT HAS TRIED TO PRESENT TO THE PUBLIC
AND INDIRECTLY TO DIPLOMATIC OBSERVERS RESIDENT HERE.

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MUCH CAN BE DISCOUNTED AS EITHER SELF-SERVING MISINFORMATION
OR AS THE PRODUCT OF ACTIVE AND UNEMPLOYED IMAGINATIONS.
IN PART THE GOVERNMENT'S LACK OF CANDOR AS TO THE REASONS FOR THE
RECENT CABINET CHANGES HAS CONTRIBUTED TO THIS BUBBLING.
AFTER ACHOUR'S RESIGNATION FROM THE POLITICAL BUREAU
AND CENTRAL COMMITTEE MORE SUCH STORIES WILL SURELY BE HEARD.

3. THE FOLLOWING IS A DISTILLATION OF SOME OF THE REPORTS WE HAVE RECEIVED IN THE PAST TWO DAYS. AS THEY COME FROM RELIABLE AND WELL PLUGGED-IN SOURCES AND HAVE A STRONG RING OF TRUTH TO THEM, I WANT TO PASS THEM ON TO THE DEPARTMENT AS BACKGROUND TO THE MOSAIC WHICH IS BEGINNING TO TAKE SHAPE.

4. REASONS FOR BELKHODJA'S REMOVAL. WORD IS OUT THAT THERE WERE TWO PRINCIPAL REASONS FOR BELKHODJA'S REMOVAL; ONE IS THAT SOME KIND OF LIBYAN-MASMOUDI CONNECTION WAS DISCLOSED; THE SECOND ONE IS SOMEHOW RELATED TO THIS AND CONCERNS BELKHODJA'S PERSONAL AMBITIONS AND HIS ARRANGEMENT WITH ACHOUR TO FURTHER THEM. ACCORDING TO THIS STORY, BELKHODJA MADE AN AGREEMENT WITH ACHOUR THAT THE POLICE, UNDER THE DIRECTION OF THE MINISTRY OF INTERIOR, WOULD NOT BE USED EFFECTIVELY OR MASSIVELY IN PUTTING DOWN CIVIL DISORDER INSTIGATED BY THE UGTT. THE RESULTING TURMOIL WOULD IN TURN BE USED AS PROOF THAT NOUIRA WAS NOT UP TO THE JOB AND THAT NEW LEADERSHIP WAS NEEDED. LIBYA, WHICH HAS LONG SOUGHT THE REMOVAL OF NOUIRA AS PRIME MINISTER, IS BELIEVED TO HAVE BACKED THIS PLAN. MASMOUDI, ALSO A LONG TIME ENEMY OF NOUIRA, HAD PUT THIS DEAL TOGETHER ACTING AS INTERMEDIARY BETWEEN QADHAFI AND ACHOUR. IT IS SAID THAT BELKHODJA MET MASMOUDI AT SOME POINT AFTER THE LATTER'S RETURN TO TUNIS DECEMBER 12, POSSIBLY IN MAHDIA WHERE THEY BOTH
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GREW UP AND WHERE EACH MAINTAINS A RESIDENCE.

5. BELKHODJA FOR HIS COOPERATION WOULD HAVE GOTTEN THE PRIME MINISTERSHIP IN THE NEW GOVERNMENT. ACHOUR HAD HIS EYES ON THE PRESIDENCY ITSELF AND BENNOUR AN INTIMATE FRIEND OF BELKHODJA'S DATING FROM THEIR TIME IN PRISON TOGETHER IN THE LATE 60S, WOULD HAVE SUCCEEDED FARHAT AS DEFENSE MINISTER. ACCORDING TO THE SCENARIO, MASMOUDI WAS TO BE REINSTALLED AS FOREIGN MINISTER.

6. CHERCHEZ LA FEMME. SUPPOSEDLY, MADAME BELKHODJA, WHO IS DIVORCING HER HUSBAND, BLEW THE WHISTLE. ALTHOUGH THE BELKHODJAS' RELATIONSHIP IS VERY STAINED, SHE CONTINUES TO LIVE WITH HER HUSBAND FOR "APPEARANCES." THE ABOVE PLANS WERE SAID TO HAVE BEEN FREQUENTLY DISCUSSED IN HER PRESENCE IN THE HOUSE AND IT WAS SHE WHO PASSED THE INFORMATION ABOUT THIS PLOT ALONG TO THE AUTHORITIES. THIS SHE DID IN REVENGE FOR TAHAR BELKHODJA'S LONGSTANDING RELATIONSHIP WITH WASSILA BOURGUIBA'S DAUGHTER NABILA TORJEMANE WHO ALLEGEDLY HAS BEEN HIS

MISTRESS FOR YEARS. MADAME BELKHODJA WAS NOT UNAWARE THAT HER ACTIONS WOULD ALSO DAMAGE WASSILA, WHO HAS SUPPORTED BELKHODJA'S LIAISON WITH HER DAUGHTER AND WHO HOPED THE TWO WOULD MARRY ONCE BELKHODJA'S DIVORCE WAS SETTLED AND NABILA HERSELF WAS FREE. (SHE IS NOW MARRIED TO A LEADING TUNISIAN BANKER, TOUFIK TORJEMANE.)

7 BELKHODJA LEAVES TUNISIA. ACCORDING TO AN UNOFFICIAL SOURCE WITH GOOD ACCESS TO GOVERNMENT, BELKHODJA IS NOW AGAIN IN FRANCE, HAVING LEFT TUNISIA LAST WEEKEND TO ACCOMPANY HIS DAUGHTER ON HER RETURN TO SCHOOL IN NICE AFTER THE HOLIDAYS. THIS SAME SOURCE TELLS US THAT HE ASKED ABOUT BELZADJA'S REPORTED DEPARTURE IN A RECENT CONVERSATION WITH A HIGH GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL AND
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THAT THIS STORY WAS CONFIRMED. THE OFFICIAL IS REPORTED TO HAVE SAID THAT BELKHODJA REMAINS A MEMBER OF THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY, HAS UNTIL PROVEN OTHERWISE A GOOD RECORD OF PUBLIC SERVICE, AND CONSEQUENTLY IS FREE TO COME AND GO AS HE WANTS. BESIDES, THE OFFICIAL REPORTEDLY ADDED, "WE DON'T WANT TO MAKE A MARTYR OUT OF HIM. THERE ARE TOO MANY ALREADY AND AS HE IS NOW, BELKHODJA CAN'T DAMAGE US." WE HAVE ALSO HEARD THAT BELKHODJA PLANS TO STAY IN FRANCE UNTIL AFTER THE JAN 20 CENTRAL COMMITTEE MEETING. DEPENDING ON WHAT HAPPENS THERE, HE WILL THEN MAKE UP HIS MIND ABOUT WHEN OR WHETHER HE SHOULD RETURN.

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8. ACHOUR'S QUANDARY. THIS SAME SOURCE TELLS US THAT HE ALSO SPOKE TO ACHOUR SEVERAL DAYS AGO AT WHICH TIME ACHOUR SAID HE WOULD RESIGN FROM THE CENTRAL COMMITTEE AND THE POLITICAL BUREAU, AS DEMANDED BY UGTT MEMBERSHIP, BUT THAT HE WAS AGAINST A FULL BREAK WITH THE PARTY. CONSEQUENTLY, HE HOPED THAT THE TWO UGTT MEMBERS IN THE CENTRAL COMMITTEE, APART FROM HIMSELF, COULD RETAIN THEIR SEATS AND THAT OTHER UGTT SUPPORTERS WOULD KEEP THEIR LESSER POSITIONS IN THE NATIONAL PSD STRUCTURE. ACHOUR IS REPORTED TO HAVE SAID HE DID NOT WANT TO COME OUT FORMALLY AGAINST A BREAK AT THIS TIME BECAUSE OF RISK OF ISOLATING HIMSELF FROM UGTT MAJORITY. THE TREND, LED BY MORE RADICAL ELEMENTS IN UGTT, SEEMS TO BE TOWARDS A FULL BREAK AND IF THIS TAKES PLACE, ACHOUR WANTS TO BE ABLE TO GO ALONG.

9. LE MONDE AND UGTT - WHICH IS FOR SALE? ACHOUR IS FURIOUS OVER AN ARTICLE WHICH APPEARED IN LE MONDE
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JAN 10 DATE LINE DED PARIS WHICH CARRIED THE TITLE, "UGTT FOR SALE." THE ARTICLE DEPICTED HOW THE UGTT HAD SOLD OUT TO THE LIBYANS, WITH MASMOUDI SERVING AS MIDDLEMAN. THIS ARTICLE WAS REPRINTED IN TUNISIAN GOVERNMENT AND PARTY PAPERS SAME DAY JAN 10 AND ACHOUR TELEPHONED THE LE MONDE CORRESPONDENT IN TUNIS AT LTOOP AS HE SAW IT. ACHOUR DENIED THE STORY AND CHARGED THAT THE JOURNALIST HIMSELF WAS WORKING FOR THE TUNISIAN GOVERNMENT. ACHOUR ALSO CHARGED THAT IF ANYTHING HAD BEEN BOUGHT, IT WAS LE MONDE. ACHOUR CLAIMED HE HAD PROOF THAT WHEN NOUIRA LEFT FOR A "PRIVATE VISIT" TO PARIS ON FRIDAY, JAN 6, HE WAS CARRYING A SUITCASE "FULL OF MILLIONS" WHICH HE PLANNED TO USE EXPRESSLY FOR THAT PURPOSE.
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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01 jan 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: POLITICAL STABILITY
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 13 jan 1978
Decaption Date: 01 jan 1960
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 20 Mar 2014
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1978TUNIS00262
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: GS
Errors: N/A
Expiration:
Film Number: D780020-0386
Format: TEL
From: TUNIS
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1978/newtext/t19780167/aaaaceni.tel
Line Count: 217
Litigation Code IDs:
Litigation Codes:
Litigation History:
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Message ID: 2d2dfce3-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Office: ACTION NEA
Original Classification: SECRET
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 4
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: SECRET
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: 77 TUNIS 9248
Retention: 0
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 05 jul 2005
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review Media Identifier:
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 3780137
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: ATMOSPHERICS OF TUNISIAN POLITICAL SCENE
TAGS: PFOR, ELAB, PGOV, TS
To: STATE
Type: TE
vdkgvwkey: odbc://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/2d2dfce3-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
Sheryl P. Walter
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
20 Mar 2014
Markings: Sheryl P. Walter Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 20 Mar 2014